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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 006502

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [PGOV](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: GOJ DEMOLITION ORDER IN PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP

SPARKS DEBATE

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) A plan to demolish homes of more than 500 families to widen a congested main thoroughfare in Jordan's second-largest Palestinian refugee camp has spawned controversy. Amman city authorities say the demolition is part of a larger plan to rehabilitate the camp's infrastructure, and they plan to either compensate families on a case-by-case basis, relocate families to another predominantly Palestinian area of Amman, or allow limited expansion of existing structures in the crowded camp. However, the government insists that no one will be forcibly evicted. Although many camp residents recognize the need to renovate the area, others say the municipality's compensation is not sufficient to secure adequate alternative housing. The Department of Palestinian Affairs agrees, and is pushing the Amman municipality to ensure fair compensation. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) has taken a leading role in advocating for those opposed to the demolition order. Given the current Palestinian-Israeli tensions and unavoidable--if unfair--comparisons to Israel's home demolition policy, the GOJ is anxious to resolve the issue, in part to avoid giving the IAF political ammunition against the government. End Summary.

CITY OFFICIALS DEFEND DEMOLITION ORDER IN FACE OF COMPLAINTS

2. (U) Greater Amman Municipality's plan to demolish structures housing more than 500 families along a crowded street in Amman's al-Wihdat Palestinian refugee camp has generated complaints from some affected residents. According to former MP and camp resident Muhammad al-Kouz, some say that the compensation package to vacate their homes is insufficient. Others do not want to leave for personal and ideological reasons, noting that al-Wihdat has been their home since fleeing Palestine more than 40 years ago. Some oppose leaving the camp -- even if it means a better situation for their families -- because they believe their continued physical presence in the camp will ensure the world will not forget about the Palestinian refugees' plight.

3. (U) Amman Mayor Nidal Hadid publicly defended the decision as part of a larger plan to rehabilitate the area and improve the welfare of camp residents. He said in a press interview that the homes marked for demolition were built illegally and have encroached on municipality property. However, the mayor noted that the municipality intended to compensate the residents -- despite the fact that squatters on state-owned land are not entitled to any compensation according to the law. No family will be forcibly removed, he said, and each case will be considered individually to assess appropriate compensation. Press reports on October 8 indicated that the city will not proceed with the demolition until a designated committee completes its evaluation of the land value and related compensation packages offered to residents.

4. (U) Camp Mukhtar Abu al-Abed acknowledged that his neighbors are of two minds about the intended demolitions. Some residents -- including shop owners who believe their businesses would receive a boost from the renovation project -- support the plan. Others, particularly renters and long-time residents, are vehemently opposed and have appealed to the government for help. Camp resident Khalil Jarhad told poloff he pays 30JD a month in rent for his family of 12, and fears the compensation will be insufficient to pay the much higher rent rates outside the camp. Another long-time resident derided the municipality's offer to her family of JD12,000 to move, saying that amount was insufficient to move her family of 20 to another part of Amman, according to a news story on the issue.

5. (U) Some residents reject Hadid's argument that their homes were built illegally, saying most were erected more than 20 years ago, with no changes of their status taking place recently. Some have appealed to the government for help. "We have sent petitions to Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb to halt the decision. We believe the King will

understand our position and hold up our rights," said camp resident Ali Mohammed Taha, in a press interview.

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WORKING TO RESOLVE ISSUE

16. (C) Director General of Palestinian Affairs Abdulkarim Abulhaija told us that the heart of the conflict centers on the poor compensation packages the city is offering to affected families. He says that if the municipality had offered fair compensation from the beginning, the planned demolitions would not have become an issue. He said he has held several meetings with municipality officials about this issue and is pressuring them to ensure they are compensating the residents adequately. Abulhaija notes that there is sufficient money in the budget, but some officials within the municipality oppose allocating more funds to the refugee population. He says the discussions will continue and the demolitions will not begin until the issue of compensation is resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

IAF: MAKING POLITICAL HAY OF THE DEMOLITION ORDER

17. (U) The IAF has taken up the cause of unhappy camp residents. Twenty members of Parliament, led by IAF deputies, sent a letter to the government in mid-September demanding that the demolitions be stopped. IAF MP Tayseer al-Fityani hosted a meeting with camp residents and members at the IAF's headquarters in al-Wihdat Camp on September 26 to discuss three options open to affected residents: financial compensation to vacate; relocation to homes located on government-owned property in the predominantly Palestinian areas of Marka; and the availability of permits to expand certain existing structures in al-Wihdat camp.

18. (C) The IAF, which claims Palestinian refugees among its core constituencies, says it is trying to play a mediating role between the al-Wihdat residents and the government. However, al-Kouz says the IAF deputies are using the situation as an opportunity to criticize the government and thus gain political advantage. Mukhtar Abu al-Abad noted that it is an extremely sensitive political issue given the natural tendency to compare the Amman demolition order to Israel's controversial home demolition policy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, even though in reality, the situations are completely different. Abulhaija agreed, saying the government is committed to resolving this issue fairly and quickly in order to avoid such comparisons and increasing tensions within the camp.

COMMENT

19. (C) Abulhaija seems confident that no demolitions will take place until the city reaches agreement over the compensation packages. However, it is unclear how the GOJ will deal with those individuals who oppose vacating on ideological and personal grounds. Building upon existing structures might be appealing to some, but given the crowded conditions of the camp, permits to pursue this route probably will be few.

10. (C) Controversy over the issue comes at a sensitive time for the GOJ, as critics invariably will draw parallels between the city's plans and Israel's controversial practice of demolishing homes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The GOJ will try to resolve the matter quickly in order to avoid providing fodder for the political opposition, particularly the IAF. Continued media coverage also highlights the dismal conditions of Palestinians refugees in the camps, something that is rarely discussed in Jordanian circles.

11. (C) Al-Wihdat Refugee Camp, situated in eastern Amman, was first established in 1955 to host 5,000 Palestinian refugees. Today, more than 50,000 people live in the camp, making it the second largest in Jordan after al-Baq'a Refugee Camp. Over the years al-Wihdat has been incorporated into the city as its temporary housing shelters have given way to permanent structures, bustling marketplaces, and infrastructure development, including plumbing. As such, al-Wihdat is virtually indistinguishable as a "camp" separate from the rest of Amman's population.

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